The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE HIGH COST OF BELIEVING

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John M. Buchanan

Every evening we sit in our living rooms and watch on the flickering screen what has gone on in the world that day. What we choose to do about it, you and I — what worthy causes, if any, get our time and energy, what political candidates get our votes, how much money we give away or could afford to give away if our hearts were really in it — these are all issues of the greatest and most far-reaching importance not just for the saving of the world but for the saving of our own souls.

Frederick Buechner
The Longing for Home

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Scripture:
Matthew 22:21
"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

At a meeting in Louisville, one of what seems like hundreds I've attended recently in the offices of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the proceedings began with what we have come to call "Sharing Joys and Concerns." People in the group that is meeting, often strangers to one another from different places in the country, are made into a little more cohesive working unit in the simple ritual of introducing themselves and then saying something aloud which they are very happy about — a joy, the birth of a grandchild, for instance — and also something about which they are concerned — the illness of a friend, for instance.

When my turn came, I had an interesting reaction. It was a Monday morning. The day before, I had preached in another city and returned to Chicago in the early evening. I went to the office and asked the receptionist and housemen how things were going. I expected to be told, "not so good since you're gone." Instead, I learned that all was not only well at Fourth Presbyterian Church, it was very good. The Kiev Symphony and Chorus had been in worship that morning. Jack Stotts had preached a great sermon. All the programs seemed to be up and running. The enthusiasm level was high. The staff was happy and content.

"My joy and my concern this morning is the same thing," I told the group the next morning in Louisville. "My joy and my concern is that the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago is doing so well without me."

I can't tell you how glad I am to be home this morning and how much I miss, not only the high moments in the life of this congregation, but also the daily routine. I also can't tell you and my colleagues how very grateful I am that things are going so well. There are many benefits which come along with the opportunity to serve as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but chief among them for me is the daily confirmation of the blessing of my ministry as pastor of this congregation.

It is a busy and full life. In a typical week I preach twice on Sunday morning, lead an adult forum between services, attend a reception or lunch afterward and then head for the airport for another engagement before heading home. On weekdays I leave early in the morning to address a presbytery or synod or organizational meeting somewhere and return once, sometimes twice, again arriving late at night and heading out in the morning. I try to schedule a day or part of a day in Chicago once a week to at least stay even with mail and appointments and then on Saturday afternoon it's back to the airport to visit another congregation on Sunday morning.

The purpose is to give some tangible expression to the unity and the connectedness of the Presbyterian family. We are a big and diverse denomination, with 2.7 million members in 11,400 congregations. And it has always been important for us to be reminded of the fact that when you become a member of a Presbyterian congregation, you are also becoming a member of this larger

diverse and very interesting family called the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Moderator is one of the few symbols a lot of Presbyterians recognize and welcome as a reminder of this broader connection with the whole family.

The purpose of the visits is to report to and encourage the congregations and presbyteries in their mission and ministry, to build up and cheer on the church — and to lift up the fact that there is a dimension to this whole business that connects us with other people. In more theological terms, to remind us all that the Gospel of Jesus Christ puts us in a new relationship with other people, that there is a new humanity created in human history by Jesus Christ and that the church is its witness and its example whether it knows it or not, whether it wants to be or doesn't want to be, which increasingly these days seems to be the case.

This is a critical year for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The subjects of human sexuality, responsible moral behavior and, in particular, whether sexual orientation should be the determining factor in the election, ordination and installation of a man or woman to ministry or church office, is before us still. People disagree, deeply and strongly. So deeply and strongly that many believe there will be no way to stay in this family if the issue is not resolved one way or the other. And the job of Moderator, this year particularly, is to try to hold it all together, try even to persuade folk that they belong together even if they cannot stand one another's position and opinion, because that's the nature of this phenomenon called church.

One of my heroes, saints and mentors in the faith, even though I never met him, was Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest, theologian, author, with a deeply spiritual and pastoral way about him. Nouwen died two weeks ago. One of his most popular books is *The Wounded Healer,* which included a wonderful story. He used to tell about his first parish; there lived, side-by-side, two racial/ethnic communities between whom there was no love lost. Sure enough, on his first Saturday night, at a church bazaar, a fight broke out. The pick-up trucks circled around and the combatants began to slug away. The way Nouwen told it, "the older priest was beside himself, walking from truck to truck telling people they were going to hell." Nouwen decided something had to be done, so he stepped in between the two men, told them to stop, whereupon one of them hit him in the nose and knocked him down. There's something like that in being Moderator.

But there is also the privilege of witnessing first hand the liveliness and vigor of Presbyterianism as it exists all over this country and the world. And there is the privilege of witnessing and participating in the mysterious miracles of grace that happen in congregations everywhere, urban and rural, large and small.

At a big suburban church, a young father told me about how much the church's ministry with his hearing-impaired son had meant to him and his family, how the father had reclaimed his faith. The congregation, in order to support the family, had launched a program, a class, to teach signing to other members of the church. Now there was a community around the little family, sitting together in the front pew on Sunday. Another hearing-impaired youngster, a teen-age girl, had become part of the group. Sitting in the church, I watched as she and her friends "sang" Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee in sign language, with all the fervor of Beethoven's Ode to Joy, and as three signers "sang" the anthem to them, I thought, "Where but the church would there be so much effort, so much grace to be inclusive, to embrace this little boy, this teen-age girl who live mostly in a world that does very little to include them?"

In San Rafael, California, the pastor, Norm Pott, surprised me by asking me to come down and sit in the middle of the children for the children's sermon. Norm told the story of the Moderator's Cross, how it is really three crosses symbolizing the three branches of our church and how the three are now one. And then he told them about me and asked them to all stand around me while he prayed for me. And at the end, instead of shaking my hand, he told them to give the Moderator a "high five" and then not to wash that hand for the rest of the day. I don't know what the parents thought, but I thought I had been anointed!

The next day, after I preached in their chapel, the students of San Francisco Theological Seminary gathered around Sue and me. As President Don McCullough prayed, they laid their hands on us and once again, we felt something of the mystery and majesty of this church.

Last week we visited the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba. Today we fly to Brazil and then Argentina and Chile to visit and bring greetings and encouragement to our mission partners and to Presbyterian churches, mission workers and volunteers.

The church of Jesus Christ matters a lot to the life of the world. I have seen it. And being away from Chicago has reaffirmed for me how very much this church matters to our part of the world.

It is no coincidence that I wanted to be in this pulpit today, Stewardship Sunday. It's the time when people who love their church and care about its existence here in this incredible location, who believe in the way it gives itself to making a difference in the lives of thousands of people every week, who think it all makes a profound difference in the life of the city, it's the time for all of us to step up, to accept responsibility and to support this church with our financial pledges.

But I also wanted to be here today because over the years I have come to know in my heart that the ritual we call stewardship, the process of persuading people to give money to the church, is really about living life as a Christian, an individual trying, in the context of his or her particular life, to follow Jesus. Stewardship is about the life of your soul. It's about purpose and meaning and faith and hope.

"If you simply want to raise money," one of my mentors used to say, "raffle a Pontiac." You can't lose. Or organize a lottery. There is no easier way. But we know, don't we, that the issue has to do with our deepest faith, our deepest being as men and women trying to be faithful, trying to live as intentionally and purposefully as we can? It's why Jesus talks more about money and giving life away than about heaven, hell or sin.

One time he was asked a very difficult question — about money. It is part of the running verbal skirmish he is having with people who are trying to embarrass him, discredit him, or trap him into saying something that will get him into trouble with the authorities. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" they ask.

It's a very good question. The head tax on all citizens of a Roman province was a vivid reminder of Israel's humiliation and oppression. Some zealously patriotic Jews held that the tax was illegal. No Jew should pay it. If Jesus said "Yes, the tax is legal. Pay it," he would have

been dismissed as a collaborator. If, on the other hand, he said, "Do not pay," he would have been arrested for insurrection. Either way, his opponents would have succeeded in discrediting him.

He asked for a coin. The head of Caesar was inscribed on it. It was, in fact, his property. The emperor owned the currency. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

They are amazed, the ones who heard it. They know exactly what he has said and what it means. Caesar is given his due; thrown a crumb, actually, a coin. God, the sovereign Lord of creation, the creator God from whom the beautiful mystery of the world comes, the creator God to whom St. Francis wrote his magnificent hymn of praise, God is the giver of all you have — your life itself. You owe everything to God, all you are, all you ever will be, all you have.

At the heart of this faith of ours is the acknowledgement, the confession, that everything that matters most to us — the love of dear ones, beauty and grace and friendship and joy and passion — all of it comes to us not because we have created it, or earned it, but as a gift. At the heart of our faith is a reminder ultimately that we are here by grace, that this day is a gift, that our lives themselves are God's precious gift to us. At the heart of this faith of ours is the acknowledgement that you and I start to live life as God intends it to be lived: full, joyful, free, exuberant, passionate, human life — when we know that it isn't ours to be hoarded and saved and squeezed and kept in the bank, that it's a gift and that its highest, holiest and most noble purpose is to give it away. Sometimes we lose sight of that fundamental Christian position because it is so easy to be a believer here and we have so much. It is not so everywhere.

I thought about the high cost of believing for some this week as I signed a letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamani and President Rafsanjani of Iran, on behalf of the P.C.(U.S.A.), expressing sadness at and protesting the death of an Iranian Christian pastor who disappeared and was hanged two weeks ago. It is not easy to be a Christian some places in the world.

I found myself thinking about that a lot in Cuba last week. We were visiting with people who had made a very costly decision. When the Castro revolution turned sharply to the left and when state-sponsored atheism began to make life very difficult for all churches and individual Christians, many Cuban people decided to leave. Most of them live in this country. Many have participated fully in the economic growth of the past 35 years. The ones who stayed have paid a steep price. If they were members of a church they could not be members of the party. They could not run for office. They were prevented from assuming positions of responsibility. Professional careers were ended. All many had left was the church and one another in the church.

We were dinner guests in the apartment of the Moderator of the Cuban Church General Assembly and his wife. When I was assured I could ask anything I wished, I asked about how the state applied pressure to believers. The Moderator's wife told me about her son, a good student at the University of Havana and a fine athlete and basketball player. Because the team represented the university and the nation, he was thrown off the basketball team and allowed to return only if he quit the church and renounced his faith. The young man did. What parent

could not understand and feel deeply this Cuban family's agony? There was a lot of pain in her voice when she told me he had moved to Germany and they had not seen him for a long time. "We have talked about our faith for years. Now we have had to learn how to live it," she said.

I thought about how the whole matter of living a full life by opening our hands and learning to give is brought into perspective in a society where nobody owns much of anything. In a marvelous worship service in Cabaiquan, a city in the central interior of Cuba, a large congregation crowded into the Presbyterian Church to wait for the American Presbyterian Moderator who was, at that point, one hour late, and very hot and very tired. But children sang and young people played wonderful hymns with a salsa beat and there was a liturgical dance and solemn candlelight procession. As I stood up to preach, I noticed people on the sidewalks trying to see in the church and to hear. And at the offering, as I fumbled with my wallet to find a dollar, I saw arms extending through the windows from the congregation on the sidewalk, placing pesos in the offering plate, and I was terribly aware of how relatively easy it is for me to be a public Christian and how little demands are placed on me and how little I have to give.

Henri Nouwen understood the essence of the Gospel when in the midst of his very distinguished academic career, in demand as a lecturer everywhere in the world, he decided to become part of a L'Arche Community in Toronto, a worldwide organization of communities devoted to the love and care of severely handicapped adults. He wrote "Whatever form the Christian ministry takes (and by "ministry" Nouwen simply meant the life to which all of us are called), whatever form it takes, the basis is always the same: to lay down one's life for one's friends." [See The Christian Century, 10/16/96, p. 957]

The high cost of believing . . . "Give to God what is God's," Jesus said, not because God needs what we have, but because we need to learn and live like that, need to learn, that is to say, that we don't "have" anything until we know it is a gift — a trust — a stewardship, to be given, spent, used.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "The more you give away in love, the more you are. It is not just for the sake of other people that Jesus tells us to give rather than to get, but for our own sakes too."

And so today — members and friends of this church — visiting members of other churches — there is a decision to be made. Its form is mundane, to be sure ... a pledge card. But it represents something far more profound. It represents your determination to follow Jesus and to begin to experience the life of faith he promises.

I have come to love one of the wonderful new hymns in our hymnal, "God, Whose Giving Knows no Ending"

> Open wide our hands in sharing...
> As we heed Christ's ageless call...
> Healing, teaching and
> reclaiming...
> Serving you by loving all.

"Give to God what is God's," he said. That means offering our lives — offering everything we have, everything we are, and everything we will be — to God in gratitude. It means being a steward.

Amen

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